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Passing the Mantle: A New Leadership for Malaysia

ABSTRACT: As Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir prepares to step down after more than two decades in power, Malaysians are both anxious and hopeful. Bridget Welsh maintains that the political succession has ushered in an era of shifting factions and political uncertainty, as individuals vie for position in the post-Mahathir environment. Karim Raslan discusses the strengths and weaknesses of Mahathir's hand-picked successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. He maintains that Abdullah will do well at moderating the influence of Malaysia's more radical Islamic leaders, but doubts whether the new prime minister can live up to the excessive expectations that the political transition has engendered. M. Bakri Musa expresses hope that Abdullah will succeed where (in his view) Mahathir has failed. For example, he urges the new leadership to revise Malaysia's three-decade affirmative action policy and to tackle the problem of corruption.

Introduction

Amy McCreedy

After more than 22 years in power, Malaysia's prime minister Mohamad Mahathir is stepping down. "I was taught by my mother that when I am in the midst of enjoying my meal, I should stop eating," he quipped, after his closing remarks to the UMNO party annual general assembly in June. "I'm going, Abdullah [Badawi] is replacing me, and I'm confident the party is secure."[1]

When the transition takes place this autumn, the active 77-year-old leader is unlikely to vanish completely from the scene—though he has promised not to follow Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew in becoming a powerful senior minister. There was a brief point during Malaysia's largest-ever anti-government rally in September 1998 when comparisons to Suharto, ousted by popular demand, seemed more appropriate. But now—as the essays in this Special Report make clear—Mahathir feels the country is stable and secure enough to transfer power to his deputy, and a smooth continuation of the status quo is expected.

All three experts in this Special Report emphasize continuity. All agree that basic governmental policies will not change much; for example, Abdullah Badawi's seemingly heartfelt pledges to address corruption will probably founder in implementation. The contributors to this Report do predict that Abdullah will improve upon Mahathir in one area: moderating the potentially destabilizing force of religious extremism. As they point out, Abdullah is widely admired for his religious knowledge and credentials, and can confront Islamic radicals (in his own quiet way) while maintaining respect from mainstream society. They also agree that Abdullah's personal style—mild, incremental, consensual—will differ from the fiery tone of his predecessor, and likely improve relations with the West. As Karim Raslan points out, Abdullah is "difficult to hate," and his "dullness" will be a relief after Mahathir's internationally notorious vitriol.

Bridget Welsh of the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University describes the intense uncertainty in Malaysian politics as the transition unfolds. During the past year, factional support for key

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leaders within UMNO have shifted constantly. After the political transition, elites will continue jockeying for position in the post-Mahathir environment—even, for those who predict a short tenure for the new leadership, the post-Abdullah environment. The general elections (probably in April 2004) and the UMNO party elections (next summer) will be lively. However, this contestation will take place largely behind the scenes, and will not involve mass public mobilization. It is not only UMNO that is in flux, Welsh points out. Leadership transitions have also occurred recently, or are imminent, within other parties as well. On what will the success of contenders be based? In the pragmatic world of Malaysian politics, rank-and-file politicians are looking to ride the coattails of leaders with rich personal networks who can provide them with public patronage and electoral security.

In the midst of this contestation, Abdullah Badawi has his own particular challenges, the most important of which is living up to the high profile of his predecessor. According to Welsh, the pressure to maintain growth levels on par with the Mahathir era may well prove to be the new leader's Achilles' heel. Economic legitimacy has taken on more importance as the regime has become more authoritarian. Meanwhile, Abdullah will also have to rebuild institutions such as UMNO, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary. Welsh points out that he will have to "manage" the continued participation (or interference) of a retired Mahathir, and help UMNO fight the challenge of an opposition that remains robust, especially in Malaysia's hinterland.

Karim Raslan, a lawyer and writer in Kuala Lumpur, agrees with Welsh on major points, though he predicts more smoothness in Malaysian political affairs over the next few years. He is doubtful that the new government will address issues of greatest concern to him professionally—judicial independence and journalistic freedom. He maintains that like most other Malaysians, cosmopolitan liberals such as he are eager to be optimistic but bound to be disappointed by the political transition. How can the government please so many diverse constituents who are eager to see the still untested Abdullah as "their man"? Karim sees the current ballooning of hope on a whole host of controversial issues as a major challenge for the new leadership.

Karim, a frequent political commentator who is personally acquainted with many of Malaysia's policy makers, gives his impressions of where the new leadership is likely to focus itself. In economic matters, Karim speculates that Abdullah's team will be less consumed with *building* things and more concerned with *cultivating* investments in infrastructure. In other words, Abdullah will seek to improve Malaysia's "software" as well as construct its "hardware." Karim expects to see most change in the area of religious moral leadership. As noted above, Abdullah has religious credentials that allow him, if necessary, to disagree authoritatively with the religious establishment. According to Karim, Abdullah has a "deep and intuitive" understanding of the Qur'an and an admirable knack for deflating potentially inflammatory religious controversies with gentle deprecation. Karim agrees with Welsh that one of Abdullah's biggest challenges will be measuring up to his high-profile predecessor, who has become "the yardstick by which all successive leaders will be judged." Meanwhile, the public is uncertain and anxious. The last political succession determined the political landscape for nearly three decades; will this one do the same?

The third essay in this special report, by **M. Bakri Musa**, poses a spirited challenge to Abdullah Badawi's government to undertake a "major reassessment" of policy in Malaysia. Musa, a physician in California who has written three books on Malaysia, is far more scathing in his appraisal of Mahathir than are the other two contributors to this Special Report. His essay examines Mahathir's lega-

cy from the perspective of "what might have been," thus pointing to where he thinks the new leadership should direct itself.

Bakri Musa highlights the contradiction between the super-efficiency of Mahathir the man (who has a "Pentium V chip compared to his predecessor's 286") and what Musa sees as the wasteful corruption of Malaysia's centrally directed system. In such a system, entrepreneurs pitch their ideas to the leader rather than testing them in the marketplace. According to Musa, the dynamic Mahathir has failed to nourish innovation in his team or in Malaysia at large; the three most senior members in Mahathir's cabinet have served a collective 70 years of "sclerosis and inertia." While the economy has grown impressively over the past few decades, Musa suggests that affirmative action and cronyism have deprived the country of much potential for growth. And while Malaysia has escaped the violence of many multiethnic nations, the voluntary segregation of today's young people does not bode well for social harmony.

Bakri Musa expresses dissatisfaction with the National Economic Program (NEP), a three-decade affirmative action policy to benefit the Malays, who make up 60 percent of the population. While acknowledging the importance of ethnic harmony, Musa maintains that "after a generation of preferential treatment, Malays . . . feel no more competitive." It is worth noting that while Musa in particular focuses on the issue of affirmative action, all three contributors to the Special Report maintain that NEP abuses are a major challenge for the new government. Welsh points out that Abdullah will be inclined to boost efficiency by strengthening meritocracy—but at the same time he must maintain the support of certain Malays who value affirmative action as the cornerstone of their political agenda. As an example of the NEP's shortcomings, Karim Raslan cites the recent scandal of shoddily constructed school computer laboratories.

Over the next several years, the extent to which Abdullah Badawi will change things will partly depend on Mahathir's presence. "I have already made it very clear that when I leave, I leave completely," the prime minister said at a televised news conference.[2] But few believe that after more than two decades at the helm of Malaysia's government, he will truly retreat to write his memoirs. Welsh maintains that unlike Lee Kuan Yew he will involve himself more in foreign than in domestic affairs. If so, the West is likely to see a great deal more of Mahathir, even as Abdullah seeks to steer most policy discussion into quieter waters.

ENDNOTES

1. Michael Vatikiotis, "The Last Hurrah," F*ar Eastern Economic Review*, July 3, 2003, 12.
2. BBC News, World Edition, July 3, 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2083730.stm.

Malaysia's Transition: Elite Contestation, Political Dilemmas and Incremental Change

BRIDGET WELSH

In June 2002, Malaysia's Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad surprised the world by offering to step down from power. In tears, Malaysia's longest serving prime minister offered to turn over the reins to his fourth deputy prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, affectionately known as "Pak Lah." For the past year, Malaysia has been in "transition mode," as politicians, business people and ordinary citizens alike prepare for new leadership. As power transitions go, this one is very stable and drawn out, reflecting the high level of control that Mahathir has managed to consolidate during his 22-year tenure. He stewarded the transition in much the same manner as he governed Malaysia over the last few years, with calculating management.

In assessing the political dynamics in Malaysia, it is important to recognize that a number of parties in both the governing coalition, the Barisan Nasional, and in the opposition are undergoing leadership changes. Besides the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), two major parties, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Parti-SeIslam Malaysia (PAS) have changed leaders in the past year, each with different ripple political effects on the system. Another opposition party, Keadilan, has merged with Parti Rakyat to become Parti Keadilan Rakyat. This merger has affected the middle ranks of leadership within the party. This trend of leadership transitions is likely to continue over the next few years. After all, six of the twenty longest serving party leaders in the world are Malaysian.

Greater Elite Contestation within UMNO

The focus of this essay, however, is on the change in the dominant political party, UMNO. This Malay party, led by Mahathir since July 1981, has been a major force since independence and the leading political party since 1970, after the pivotal racial riots of 1969. Below, I argue that the transition has

increased factionalism within UMNO, which is unlikely to resolve itself until the party elections (expected in summer 2004). The political transition will play out largely outside of the public eye, in established political arenas, and is unlikely to spill over into society at large. This contest will be fierce and fluid, as UMNO elites will jockey for position with the aim of placing themselves in line for future party leadership in what many, although not all, expect to be a short tenure of Mahathir's chosen successor.

Factionalism in UMNO is not new. During the Mahathir years, factionalism deepened as a result of the bottleneck in the party hierarchy. Younger elites, who come from the majority of the Malay population, had limited opportunities to rise through the ranks. At the same time, Malaysia's wealth, often tied to pivotal and lucrative opportunities of state access, provided party members with increased financial rewards. The combustible combination of money and limited advancement fostered competition.

In the early years of the Mahathir era, this took the form of a direct challenge to his leadership. In 1986-1987 Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, under the rubric "Team B" (which incidentally included Abdullah Badawi) split UMNO and directly chal-

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lenged Mahathir's leadership. Mahathir survived the contest by a slim majority of votes in the UMNO party election. This contest, like the current elite contestation, had limited societal spillover. In the wake of the split, political tussling occurred mainly on the party's lower rungs, particularly among division chiefs. These contests remained largely elite affairs.

It was not until 1998, when Anwar Ibrahim challenged Mahathir in the party elections, that UMNO contestation mobilized ordinary Malaysians. Under the rubric of *reformasi,* Anwar seriously undermined the ethnic base of the party, as Malays flocked to the opposition in the 1999 polls. It is estimated that Malay support for UMNO dropped from 61 percent to 42 percent in the tenth general elections. The party, however, remained intact, as a popular, although less dynamic, Abdullah Badawi replaced Anwar in the deputy position.

In both these leadership contests, UMNO factionalism was largely shaped by personal loyalties to individuals, although in each case there were different views on policy—the level of state involvement in the economy (1986), response to the Asian financial crisis (1998), and the development of UMNO as an institution.

The current scenario does not offer the same degree of personal loyalties and policy differences, although these factors are present under the surface. Since this is a power transition as opposed to a leadership challenge, factionalism within UMNO has become murkier. The current scenario contains many similarities with the back-door party negotiations that characterized the 1976 leadership transition after the illness of the second prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak. In that instance, Tun Hussein Onn won leadership by being the most amenable contender to party elites. In the current transition, the leadership decision was made almost exclusively by Mahathir, who rebuilt UMNO in his shadow after the 1988 split and emphasized personal loyalty. Many elites are waiting for their opportunity within the party to voice their positions and will do so in the next UMNO party elections.

During the last year, as the transition has unfolded, the lines of support for key leaders within UMNO have shifted constantly, as individuals within the rank-and-file search for "safe" positions in the post-Mahathir environment as well as aim to advance their future positions. The factors that have shaped factionalism within UMNO have less to do with personalities and policy than with the resources that provide security for future positions. These include: state patronage, electoral support, personal ties, capable domestic leadership and a credible international persona.

State patronage, or the distribution of funds, traditionally has been a major factor for UMNO party members. In the 1970s, the expansion of the public sector deepened the tie between the bureaucracy and party leaders. The New Economic Policy (NEP), fueled by increased revenue from oil, massively expanded public spending for the Malay community, particularly in education. The boundaries between the bureaucracy and party became blurred. Through the 1980s, state distribution remained important, yet the locus moved to the private sector. UMNO became more tied to business and access to state resources through "rents." As Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo K.S. have shown, contracts, licenses and financial gains from privatization took on more significance. UMNO elites remain interested in securing their financial positions. In this regard, ties to ministries and agencies that distribute these "spoils" will be crucial as the elite struggles unfold.

Equally important for UMNO elites is demonstrating strong electoral support. The 1999 polls dented the political fortunes of rising elites, as Malay voters abandoned the party in high numbers. Perhaps the hardest hit by the general election was Minister of Defense Dato' Sri Najib Tun Abdul Razak, who only squeaked by with a 261 majority, despite winning the most votes in the UMNO party election for a vice presidency. The challenge from PAS remains significant (especially in the Malay rural areas of Kelantan, Teregganu, Pahang, Kedah and Perlis) and UMNO rank-and-file members want to ride on the coattails of a strong leadership team that will secure their own electoral fortunes. While the recent delineation exercise strengthens UMNO through the creation of more ethnically mixed constituencies, the party continues to face the challenge of winning back Malay support, especially among younger voters. Since Abdullah Badawi will likely have the power to influence the selection of candidates, the forthcoming general elections which may be held as early as December this year (although more likely in the spring of 2004), will be

a major test for his party stewardship and other party elites.

The factor least understood and appreciated by analysts of UMNO is the centrality of personal ties and relationships. Previous party conflicts in 1986-87 and 1998 illustrated the role of personal loyalty, which has long been associated with Malay leadership (seen by some analysts as having feudal roots). The issue of personal ties goes beyond loyalty and moves into more intangible issues of character. To coin a phrase from contemporary political science, the UMNO members (both rank-and-file and elite) are assessing leaders for their "social capital," for the richness of their social networks and those of their family members and staff. Such assessments are facilitated by the high degree of familiarity among UMNO members, due in large part to extensive social ties, shared education experiences and intermarriage among families. Popular leaders with rich networks—often buttressed by connections at the state (*negeri*) level and bonds formed within party youth organizations—have a strong social base on which to build support. Leaders with spouses and family members that are popular among other spouses and with other family members also have an advantage.

Character and morality matter more politically today than they did pre-Mahathir . . . Leadership contenders are scrutinized for perceived "character" flaws, real or imagined.

The importance of social capital within UMNO has been shaped by the character assassinations that have become more common in Malaysian politics. This practice was famously demonstrated in the Anwar episode, but extends to a broader range of individuals, back to the attacks on Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah after the 1986-1987 party split. Character and morality matter more politically today than pre-Mahathir, due in part to greater Islamization among the Malay community and to the rising electoral challenge of PAS. Leadership contenders are scrutinized for perceived "character" flaws, real or imagined. One of the strengths of Abdullah Badawi is that many see him as passing the important "personal" obstacle of the "character" test.

Paralleling assessments of leaders' social capital lies a deep-seated pragmatism in Malaysian politics. Party members want capable leadership and Mahathir himself has set the bar. His leadership has been credited with Malaysia's impressive economic performance and the reduction of open ethnic tensions. Malaysians, both in and out of UMNO, want Mahathir's strengths and correctives on his weaknesses, in areas such as clean government. All the contenders for positions in UMNO will be judged on their ability to create and implement policy. Most face the problem of having to come out of Mahathir's shadow, and many are not credited with achieving specific policy objectives. For the rank-and-file, the issue of capable leadership is tied to electoral support (particularly among middle class and Chinese voters) and state patronage.

Also important to the outcomes of UMNO's murky factional contests is the issue of a credible international persona. Mahathir's strong role in areas such as the Look East Policy, North-South relations and recent discussions of terrorism, have accustomed Malaysians to leadership with strong international recognition and presence. Upcoming leaders within UMNO will be judged as capable partly for their ability to move between domestic and international arenas—to be fluent in Malay and English, to be effective both within the party and among diplomats. This criterion, although less significant than the others mentioned above, plays a role in shaping loyalties within UMNO.

All of the contenders for leadership positions have mixed fortunes in these areas. Thus the competition has been in constant flux during the transition, which will continue to unfold during the next year. The deputy prime ministership is the key position, but not the only one. Power will come from the contenders' portfolios in government, not just their positions within the party hierarchy. In turn, the portfolios will shape the level of state patronage and translate into other dimensions of power within UMNO.

The internal elite contestation will initially weaken UMNO, which has already been weakened in the wake of the beating and arrest of Mahathir's ex-deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 and subsequent loss of Malay support in the 1999

polls. The immediate affect of an enfeebled UMNO will be higher levels of uncertainty in the political process, which will primarily resonate at the elite level. What distinguishes the ongoing contestation is the common bond—particularly among those with narrower majorities—to survive the challenge of PAS and, to a lesser extent, Keadilan. Although the Barisan Nasional has won all but two of the nine by-elections since the 1999 polls, and a loss at the national level is extremely unlikely due to support in East Malaysia and among Chinese voters, PAS in particular poses a real electoral threat in the Malay heartland, where UMNO derives its political legitimacy. UMNO needs a decisive victory among Malay voters to relegitimize itself as winner of the majority of Malay support. The new leadership *en masse* needs this confirmation, and this common need will limit infighting.

Irrespective, UMNO elite contestation will remain central as the transition evolves. The focus of UMNO elites will remain on consolidating their position in domestic politics, particularly within the party.

Political Dilemmas, Future Challenges

As the chosen unelected (by the party) expected leader of UMNO, Abdullah Badawi will face a litany of challenges. The ability to meet these challenges will be shaped by his own leadership style. Abdullah is believed to be personable, thoughtful and consensus-oriented. It is these traits that have allowed him to repetitively win party support, even after his decision to join Team B in the 1980s. At the same time, Abdullah is believed to be a slow decision maker. Perhaps more than any other, this feature has fostered anxiety among those supporting Mahathir and accustomed to a decisive leadership style.

While it is clearly far too early to predict his tenure, Abdullah will face a set of challenges upon taking power in November. The most significant is the pressure to maintain growth rates. One of Mahathir's legacies is an emphasis on economic performance. Although the Malaysian economy has rebounded since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, it has yet to find a new engine of growth. Economic legitimacy has taken on more importance as the regime has become more authoritarian, and may become Abdullah's Achilles' heel. Pressure from UMNO elites and ordinary Malaysians to perform economically will be intense—in a period when higher deficits limit the use of public expenditure to spur growth and the international climate is less amenable to investment in Southeast Asia.

At the same time, Abdullah will be expected to address perceptions of rising Islamic extremism in Malaysia. As home affairs minister, Abdullah has taken a hard line on extremism, arresting numerous accused terrorists. He has not established himself as a supporter of human rights, particularly civil liberties. Nevertheless, his image as a moderate with Islamic credentials will work to his advantage. Yet, here too, Abdullah faces the difficult challenge of finding the right balance between tackling extremism, not alienating an increasingly religious Malay electorate, and dealing with demands for greater political openness.

In order to illustrate that he is different from Mahathir, Abdullah will also face the need to rebuild institutions—particularly UMNO, the bureaucracy and the judiciary—which have weakened under Mahathir's tenure. To a greater degree than his predecessor, he needs the institutions to consolidate his own authority and thus has an incentive to bring about changes. Each institution involves unique obstacles, but the common areas of reform are increasing accountability, improving capability, addressing corruption, and promoting regeneration based on merit rather than on personal loyalty.

Abdullah will have to decide which institutions he is willing and capable of reforming. Of the three, he is most likely to address the bureaucracy in the area of meritocracy. Abdullah had his roots in the bureaucracy during a period when meritocracy was highly valued. While Abdullah and his supporters have heralded the fight against corruption (reinforced by his "Mr. Clean" image), his practical ability to make changes will depend on the political space he secures, which is unlikely to be significant in the short term.

The issue of meritocracy raises another challenge for Abdullah—tackling the legacy of the New Economic Policy (NEP), known officially since 1990 as the National Development Policy. The recent debate, largely driven by the need to increase Malaysia's economic competitiveness, has called into question some of the NEP's fundamentals, from education quotas to ownership patterns. Abdullah will need to maintain the support of the Malay community, many of whom view the NEP as a

political cornerstone of their power, while at the same time increasing competitiveness among Malays through greater multi-ethnic competition.

Non-Malays, who perceive the policy as ethnically discriminatory, would receive favorably a change in the NEP. Chinese Malaysians increasingly believe that their political power is being eroded, largely because the number of Malays has grown compared to the other communities. Abdullah, like Mahathir earlier, is an unknown quantity. Abdullah will need to shore up support among non-Malays and show a commitment to minority rights without upsetting UMNO or the Malay community.

Abdullah's main political task will be to rebuild Malay electoral support, a challenge that will determine greatly his future within UMNO and credibility as a national Malay leader. After his honeymoon period, he will have to address the legacy of the Anwar issue and the problem of weaker support among younger Malay voters. Meanwhile, he will have to build an international profile in his own right.

In facing each of these challenges, Abdullah will have to manage Mahathir, his predecessor. Although Mahathir is highly likely to retire from office, as he has repetitively announced, he will not necessarily depart from political life. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the only other prime minister who passed the mantle during his lifetime, continued to play a role as a regular newspaper columnist and, in the 1980s, an active supporter of key UMNO members in party infighting. Mahathir will likely play such a role as well. Though it remains undefined, this role will particularly take place on the international stage, where Mahathir has been increasingly active in the last third of his tenure.

Expectations and Incremental Change

Change will likely occur slowly and incrementally, given the scope of elite contestation, Abdullah Badawi's style, and the political dilemmas he will inherit. Some Malaysians want a slow pace, others will be less satisfied. Each of Abdullah's predecessors, including Mahathir, established himself gradually. Time and political fortune will tell whether Abdullah has the political acumen to emerge out from Mahathir's shadow and be elected by UMNO members and Malaysians in his own right.

Endnotes

1. See A. B. Shamsul, "The Battle Royal: The UMNO Elections of 1987," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 1988 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988), 170-88.
"The 'Battle Royal': The UMNO Elections of 1987," in Mohammed Ayoob and Ng Chee Yuen (eds), *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1988, 170-188.
2. See Bridget Welsh, "Real Change?: Elections in the *Reformasi* Era," in Edmund Terence Gomez (ed.), *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity and Reform* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 162-193.
3. Edmund Terence Gomez and K.S. Jomo, *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, Patronage and Profits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
4. See Ong Kian Ming and Bridget Welsh, *Crisis and Reaction: Malaysian Elections under the Microscope,* manuscript in progress.
5. A.C. Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1982).

New Leadership, Heavy Expectations

KARIM RASLAN

This autumn, Mahathir will step down after more than 22 years as prime minister of Malaysia. The entire nation will look to his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to build on Mahathir's legacy, correct the mistakes of the past, and make decisions for the future.

For Malaysians my age and younger (I am nearly 40), Mahathir *is* Malaysia. He is our history. In Gore Vidal's novel *Duluth*, a neon sign atop the tallest communications tower proclaims of the bustling city, "Love it or loathe it, you can never leave it or lose it." These words could also refer to Mahathir. He is there wherever we look. The country is shaped by him; there is much to loathe and there's also much to admire—but what choice do we have?

Certainly, Mahathir is the yardstick by which all successive leaders will be judged. Can they be as feisty? Can they be as steely and decisive under pressure? Can they be as quick? On the other hand, very few people realize that Dr. Mahathir is extremely diffident and thoughtful in person. Those who would seek to emulate him—his many followers—merely respond to his combativeness and ignore the other aspects of his personality.

Now that Mahathir is stepping down, how do Malaysians feel? There is no easy answer to this question. Most have mixed feelings. They are troubled, uncertain and anxious in turns, but also relieved. It is time for Malaysia to move on. The country cannot and will not tolerate any more Dr. Mahathir—but that does not mean that people do not acknowledge the extent of his achievements. Still, it is time for him to go, and we are glad that he has seized the opportunity to leave at a juncture when public respect and admiration for him remains extremely high.

The Weight of Hope

My greatest concern for Malaysia's new government is that Abdullah Badawi is burdened heavily with the

weight of the nation's expectations. Prominent politicians and people from all spectrums of Malaysian life, many of whom dislike one another intensely, have told me they are pleased that Abdullah is taking over. That Abdullah has managed to persuade so many that he is their "man" is well and good, at this stage. But later he will disappoint, because in Malaysia one can never please the *ulamas*, the bureaucracy, the media, the NGOs, the business community and everyone else at the same time. It doesn't happen because such diverse constituencies will inevitably be seeking very different policy objectives.

So, what can we expect from the new government? First, I want to make clear that mine is not a mainstream view. My opinions are those of a lawyer and a writer—two professions that are disliked strongly by the current prime minister. Moreover, those with a cosmopolitan and international outlook are to a large extent distrusted by Malay and Islamist nationalists (whether in PAS or UMNO), who are growing stronger every day. Viewpoints such as mine are more or less sidelined within Malaysia, no matter how much airspace we receive outside the country.

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To be fair, I must acknowledge that Abdullah Badawi recognizes the important role that journalists, writers, and lawyers have to play. Malaysia's future as a great trading nation depends on our international profile, so we are given a bit of space. In fact, Malaysians with a cosmopolitan bent are keenly awaiting the transition. We are fervently hoping that Abdullah will make a positive difference in such areas as strengthening the judiciary and rule of law; loosening restrictions on the media; encouraging a more open and tolerant society; reducing corruption; and improving relations with our neighbors (particularly our neighbor to the south; I've gone on record many times criticizing our dealings with Singapore). We are, perhaps, as guilty as any group of projecting onto Abdullah our hopes—of seeing him as "our man."

Of course, one reason we must curb our expectations is that Mahathir will still be around after he retires, looking after his legacy. Abdullah will not find it easy to oppose or even alter the stated aims and views of his predecessor, at least not for some time. Having said that, it is highly unlikely that Abdullah would even want to change much of Mahathir's ambitious development agenda for Malaysia. In short, continuity will be maintained at all costs. I think Abdullah sees himself as the caretaker of Mahathir's legacy, tweaking the policies from time to time in order to ensure their continuing effectiveness.

That Abdullah has persuaded so many that he is their "man" is well and good, at this stage. But later he will disappoint, because in Malaysia one can never please the ulamas, the bureaucracy, the media, the NGOs, the business community and everyone else at the same time.

Therefore, Malaysians must realize—as many do—that compromises are inevitable. Frankly, I believe that the key compromises will be in those areas closest to my heart, the judiciary and the media. It is clear, from the case of Anwar Ibrahim that the judiciary remains under tight executive scrutiny. As for the media, I do not expect to see the day when I am free from government control, free from constantly editing myself or being edited.

Abdullah Badawi's Strengths

If I aim to be positive—and sometimes it's useful to be positive and not to be forever pushing down expectations—I would point out that Abdullah Badawi is in many ways more patient and diplomatic than his predecessor. Mahathir is passionately fascinated with *building* things, and only thinks later about how they should be run and maintained. Abdullah, by comparison, recognizes that Malaysia needs skills and knowledge to grow the infrastructure investments, to improve Malaysia's "software" and not just its "hardware." I see recognition of the importance of these issues, even among the economic team, which will be a handover from the previous government.

I am also fairly upbeat on the issue of religion. Abdullah is extremely comfortable in this area. He has a deep and intuitive understanding of the Holy Qur'an. Therefore, he is able to argue on issues related to Islam without having to rely on support and advice from the religious establishment. He confidently deals with minor issues that flare up. For example, when a Malay girl was picked up for singing in an establishment that served alcohol, he simply inquired if all the Malaysia Airlines stewardesses would be similarly arrested. Thus, he manages to deflate situations through gentle deprecation. Of course, the inability of PAS to win over the non-Muslim communities over the past few years has made the government's position far less challenging.

Abdullah Badawi likes to work for consensus—in this way he differs from the prime minister. In a sense, he will benefit from Mahathir's having inspired such vitriol. Mahathir's combative personality earns him many enemies. Abdullah, by comparison, is difficult to hate—perhaps because he comes across as a dull if likeable gentleman. In the arena of international affairs his less abrasive personality will have a substantial impact on Malaysia's external relations because, in the world of diplomacy, style is substance. In this respect, dullness works to his advantage. But at times his toiling for consensus may prove to be a liability. For example, he will seek to

build consensus in the civil service for his goals. But even in the 1980s, when the civil service was more capable than now, Mahathir found it easier to push it aside and work instead with the private sector.

I am heartened by Abdullah's talk of revisiting the National Economic Policy (NEP), of how Malay participation in the economy could be reconfigured. Indeed, the government would do well to look beyond quantitative measures. We should be asking questions about the qualitative nature of Malay participation in the economy. Discussing how much of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange is in Malay hands is a crude way of examining Malay economic achievement. We should probe deeper and ask: What other economic engines to growth exist? How can Malays be involved in these sectors? How can they be equipped to participate fully? Certainly, new ideas are being considered in the highest government circles, though whether they can be implemented is still questionable. A recent fiasco involving shoddy, behind-schedule construction of school computer labs is only the latest scandal exposing the flaws of current NEP practices, despite the NEP's laudable goals. I do feel that Abdullah has a slightly lower tolerance level for corruption than his predecessor.

What can be expected of new personnel? There will be many new faces after next year's general election. To be sure, new faces do not guarantee a change in political culture, and I am not convinced that the new members of parliament will be better than the old. The persistence of the political culture in Malaysia is why we depend on a few key figures leading the way. If he does tackle corruption, Abdullah will have to set clear lines to keep the new generation in line. But having secured his mandate, I hope he will be able to act.

Finally, the economy. The legitimacy of the government and of the Barisan Nasional rides on the ability to deliver the goods; that was why the economic crisis in 1997 was potentially crippling. Abdullah is not as familiar with economic matters as he is with religious and other socio-political issues, so whether he can tackle corruption and inefficiency remains questionable. He will lean heavily on Mahathir's team in this area.

However, the changing international economic landscape—the rise of China and the decline in foreign direct investment—has altered the familiar equation of multinational investments, exports and dramatic economic growth. Recent experiences in Thailand have been noted at the highest levels of the Malaysian government, although it remains to be seen whether or not the authorities will adopt the same set of economic policies with their emphasis on stimulating domestic consumption. While the government struggles to formulate a response to these external changes, it is also faced with having to tackle the legacy of the NEP's heavy tilt towards the Malay/Muslim community and the need to reassess the attendant inefficiencies. Abdullah will be judged with reference to his ability to overcome these twin challenges.

I believe that Abdullah Badawi will be placing a substantial emphasis on enhancing Malaysia's competitiveness—addressing issues of corruption and corporate governance, and also improving efficiency in both the private and public sectors. The willingness to reassess the once-sacrosanct NEP and consider the policy in the light of external cost pressures is in many ways an extraordinary step forward.

One reason we must curb our expectations is that Mahathir will still be around after he retires, looking after his legacy. . . . Frankly, I believe that the key compromises will be in those areas closest to my heart, the judiciary and the media.

Conclusion

As October's political transition draws nearer, many Malaysians are remembering the passing away of the second prime minister, Tun Razak. In the days after his death, a pact (essentially) was made that sorted out the political landscape for the next 28 years. Now people sense that October's transition and Abdullah's selection of a deputy prime minister will determine the landscape for many decades to come. Thus the elites are jockeying for position. In many ways—as Bridget Welsh writes in her essay in this Special Report—the contestation will largely

take place behind the scenes without spilling over into the public at large. But the public feels a mix of anxiety, disquiet, relief and hopefulness.

Malaysians can hope for change in many areas that affect the broader society, especially for leadership in issues of religious morality. However, we may have to wait a long time for better courts and better newspapers. As mentioned above, transformation is unlikely to occur in areas where people like myself —lawyers and writers—are active. However, there are glimmers of hope; to hope too much is demoralizing, but to hope too little is dispiriting.

Post-Mahathir Malaysia: Coasting Along

M. BAKRI MUSA

The recurring refrain from Kuala Lumpur these days is that there will be no major shifts in policies with Prime Minister Mahathir's retirement in October 2003. This refrain is meant to reassure foreigners and natives alike. However, I feel anything but reassured by the government's clinging to the status quo.

After 23 years of dominant and often domineering leadership, Mahathir's departure calls for a much-needed reappraisal of his policies. Insofar as the policies have been effective, the nation has changed—should not we therefore need a different approach to reflect the new reality? On the other hand, if policies have failed, then there is all the more reason to jettison them.

To suggest that a major reassessment is unnecessary is a cop-out, an abrogation of responsibility?and demonstrates an inability to escape Mahathir's authoritarian presence even after his stepping down.

Mahathir has truly been, to use James McGregor Burns' terminology, a transforming leader.[1] The country's physical transformation is obvious upon landing at the gleaming new international airport, driving along the smooth undulating freeways, or viewing the capital city's impressive skyline. Such achievements are even more remarkable when one considers the generally sorry state of many plural societies, such as Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka.

While Mahathir's admirers may run out of superlatives to describe his achievements, his detractors do not lack for ammunition either. The judiciary, once the envy of the region, is today a mere shadow of its former glory. It has been a long time since any chief justice left the bench with reputation intact, let alone enhanced. Similarly, schools are a disgrace. In the 1970s, Mahathir was hailed as a visionary when he replaced English with Malay in the schools. Now he is desperately trying to reverse that move, the folly of which has become obvious.[2] Perversely, in an Orwellian twist, he is again hailed a hero for his U-turn. He would prefer that we do not recall his earlier zeal.

I will examine Mahathir's legacy from the perspective of "what might have been." Such a perspective will point to where a post-Mahathir leadership should direct itself.

This essay will examine how Mahathir's promise was not realized. Just as bright students—not average ones—disappoint a teacher the most, by not reaching their potential, so it is with national leaders. Great leaders who do not achieve great heights are the most disappointing.

Mahathir is the most effective leader in Malaysian history, though he had some illustrious predecessors. Yet there he was, on the 20th anniversary of his rule, tearfully lamenting having failed at what he considered his most important mission—to change the mental and cultural attitudes of Malays.[3] We could argue that the man may be too hard on himself, as is common among high achievers. Nonetheless, in that public confession, the pathos was real. I venture that he has a keen sense of "what might have been."

I will explore four areas: his leadership style; his views on race; his attitude towards the West, and his relationship with the Islamists.

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Leadership Style

When Mahathir became prime minister in 1981, his "clean, trustworthy, and efficient" administration took the country by storm. He made a big show of wearing a nametag and signing in for work every morning—always early, of course. This was highly symbolic, for in Malaysia only peons and janitors wore nametags. A more cynical view would be that he had effectively reduced the chief-executive position to a nine-to-five timecard job.

He buckled down to serious business immediately, barking out "initiatives a million a minute," to quote Musa Hitam, his deputy at the time. He had a Pentium V chip compared to his predecessor's 286.

Mahathir's style is often described as autocratic and dictatorial. To me, it was more a one-man show. He succeeded in turning the whole nation into his echo chamber, where his every utterance gets reverberated and amplified, drowning all others. And therein lies the problem.

Younger leaders—the products of today's segregated schools—are strangers to each other. These leaders aggravate racial polarization. . . . And after a generation of preferential treatment, Malays feel no more competitive.

One consequence is that everything he says goes, and nothing gets done without his approval. He centralized decision-making under the pretext of efficiency. The result was a command and control structure that even the old Soviet system could envy.

Such tight control spills into the private sector. In the United States, an entrepreneur with a promising product or idea first tests it in the marketplace. In Malaysia, you seek an audience with Mahathir. If you can sell it to him, then the doors are wide open. Banks will readily finance you, and you become the government's favored vendor.

Budding entrepreneurs learn quickly that to succeed they do not need to pay attention to clients or customers but must rather suck up to the politically powerful. The road to riches is not through creating and building, but through getting the right contacts and contracts. This is true anywhere, but especially pervasive in Mahathir's Malaysia. Mahathir created a class not of builders and creators, but of rent collectors and parasites.

A measure of this pernicious influence is that during the economic crisis of 1997, the top ten borrowers hogged a staggering US$36 billion of the non-performing loans, with the top two bagging a whopping US$20 billion.[4] Those borrowers were the fortunate few who had Mahathir's imprimatur.

I have observed that the more effective a leader is, the less well known he is abroad. Conversely, the most incompetent and corrupt leaders regularly make the headlines. Saddam Hussein is only the latest example. Few in the world could name the leaders of Taiwan or South Korea; yet they have done immense good for their citizens. The West hardly noticed Mahathir during the first half of his tenure. I'm sure that this was fine with him, for Malaysia thrived under his stewardship. In the less effective second half of his rule, however, just about everyone abroad heard of him, in keeping with my observation.

Mahathir's defiance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) following the 1997 economic crisis, once ridiculed, is now widely viewed as particularly prescient. To be praised by economists must gratify him greatly.[5] But lost amidst the laudatory praises is the basic question: How did Malaysia end up in the mess in the first place?

Mahathir reminds me of a surgeon whose patient first suffers a setback before being salvaged skillfully. Everyone is in awe—until someone asks the basic question: "Doctor, what brought on the setback?" How could mere currency speculation cripple Malaysia's economy?

Another consequence of this powerful one-man show is the "big oak" effect, which overshadows new growth. Mahathir once quipped that he would like to be succeeded by his clone. Alas, there is no young Mahathir out there. This, more than anything else, is the most glaring failure of his leadership. Take a look at Mahathir's cabinet. The three most senior members have served collectively 70 years. To some, this situation reflects solid experience; to me, sclerosis and inertia. More tellingly, these same three have less than seven years private-sector experience

between them, all at very low levels. When Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Mahathir's successor-to-be) was outside the government in 1990, the best he could do was to become a travel agent—in his sister-in-law's company! This was the market valuation of his talent and experience, despite having served as education, foreign, and defense minister.

The legacy of a parent is a child; of a leader, a successor. For Mahathir, that legacy is Abdullah Badawi.

While his party UMNO is starved of talent and remains stuck to its tradition-bound feudal ways, Mahathir ironically has successfully transformed the greater Malaysian society. Nowhere is this change more dramatically demonstrated than in their attitude towards their leaders, much to Mahathir's chagrin.

Three decades ago, when the prime minister struggled to cope with the aftermath of the 1969 race riots, few dared to call for his resignation. The exception? One young Mahathir, who did it in the deferential and oblique manner befitting a peasant confronting his feudal lord.[6]

Today, reflecting the success of Mahathir's policies, communications between ruler and ruled are neither formal nor deferential. A few years ago, when Malaysians were outraged over Mahathir's treatment of his erstwhile deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, they were not in the least restrained in expressing their displeasure. A young Mahathir would no doubt approve this new assertiveness, but an elder Mahathir feels otherwise.

Race Relations

Who would have thought that Mahathir, once tagged an *ultra* (as in "ultra-chauvinist") for uncompromisingly championing Malay rights, would today count on non-Malays as his staunchest and most reliable supporters?

Malaysia is a plural nation. This reality could be leveraged into an asset, or by default it becomes a liability. And what a liability! Rwanda and the Balkans are ghastly reminders. But if we could tap the richness in the diversity of cultures and languages, then Malaysians would be at a significant competitive advantage in this increasingly globalized world. Malaysians abroad for example, adapt remarkably well simply because they are used to cultural diversity at home.

Two generations after independence, a common Malaysian identity still eludes the nation. Three factors contribute to this lack of identity: 1) racially segregated schools, 2) race-based political parties, and 3) affirmative action.

Malaysian schools today are much more segregated than during British rule. In colonial times, segregation was imposed, part of a strategy of "divide and conquer." Today, however, Malaysians *choose* to remain apart. The increasing emphasis on Islamic studies in the national stream since the 1980s drove away non-Muslim students. Far from bringing the young together, today's schools reinforce ethnic identity.

Malaysia's race-based parties have been remarkably successful in ensuring that no group is politically marginalized. This contributes immensely to racial harmony. It is also much more transparent and effective than the awkward gerrymandering in drawing up U.S. Congressional districts. The success of the Malaysian formula is attributable to strong bonds between senior leaders formed during their school and college days. Such bonds ease political and other differences. However, younger leaders—products of today's segregated schools—are strangers to each other. These leaders aggravate racial polarization by blatantly pandering to the prejudices of their most chauvinistic followers.

Malaysia's preferential policy also contributes to divisiveness in society. Few would argue with its noble intent of reducing inequities, or quibble that it is a drag on the economy. Besides, such inefficiencies were a necessary price for social stability. The 1969 riot was a rude awakening. Moreover, some economists have now shown that gross inequities can impede economic growth.[7]

Yet after a generation of preferential treatment, Malays—the primary beneficiaries—feel no more competitive. Mahathir himself has declared his dissatisfaction with the program. To be fair, it has many successes, especially in education, but even these successes have led to problems. For example, a generation ago any Malay scholarship recipient was almost certainly a poor villager, the first in his family to go to college. Today that probability has dropped significantly. Unmodified, special privileges risk degenerating into a massive entitlement program instead of reaching the population they were designed for.

Initially, non-Malays supported—or at least resignedly accepted—preferential policies. Today, they resent such programs, which make them feel less Malaysian. Many, especially the highly talented, have emigrated. Their loss is only now being realized.

The challenge is how to enhance the competitiveness of all Malaysians, Malays especially. Today affirmative action is not the solution; it is the problem. Had the billions squandered on creaky government corporations in the name of helping Malays been used to improve schools and universities, Malays and Malaysia would definitely be better off. And so too would Mahathir's legacy.

Foreign Relations

Mahathir had little exposure to the West in his formative years. His only experience was with colonial rulers and British professors in Singapore. At that time, British academics tended to be aloof and imperious, only reinforcing Mahathir's negative views. He does not care to hide his anti-Western prejudices. In his farewell speech at his party's General Assembly, he unleashed his venom, labeling Anglo-Saxons as "greedy and war-like."[8]

It might well take someone with the religious pedigree of Abdullah Badawi to shrink the Islamic establishment and modernize Islamic schools, just as it took a Nixon to go to China.

The old man's racial hang-ups are not important in themselves, but when he expresses them in his capacity as leader, it impacts negatively on Malaysia. Mahathir has been especially insufferable since being proven right in defying the IMF. In his warped mind this incident confirmed the evil intentions of the West, especially of the United States.

The United States is Malaysia's biggest trading partner. Any shrewd businessman knows that you humor your best customer, yet Malaysian leaders take perverse pleasure in tweaking America. Amazingly, despite the obvious importance of the United States to Malaysia, no local university offers a program in U.S. studies. At the last UMNO General Assembly, Najib Razak (whom Mahathir openly favors to be the next Deputy Prime Minister) suggested that Malaysian universities should have Schools of Occidental Studies, not for the purpose of legitimate academic pursuit but, in his words, "so we could better understand our enemy." And this character has the gumption to believe that he is the right man to lead Malaysia!

Malaysia shares much in common with the United States. Our Islamic faith shares a common heritage with Christianity and Judaism. Malaysia received its alphabet from the West and demographically is more like America than the ethnically homogenous East Asian countries that Mahathir so fancies. Mahathir's anti-Western sentiment saddens me for another reason—he and Malaysia could have been an effective bridge between the Islamic world and the West.

The casual foreign observer of the United States easily confuses the aberrant with the norm. America with its inkblot messiness is a Rorschach test; what is viewed as "America" reveals more about the observer than the observed. Some travel to Washington, D.C. and see only potholes and pornography shops, others the Smithsonian and the National Institutes of Health.

Abdullah Badawi has even less exposure to the West and to capitalism. I therefore expect him to continue Mahathir's pattern of seeing the blight rather than the best of the West.

Co-opting Political Islam

Mahathir is without doubt the most pious Malaysian leader. His predecessor, the Tunku, gambled at the racetrack, entertained with dancing girls, and openly admitted to drinking whisky nightcaps. Yet few criticized him. When they did, he pled disarmingly, "Those are my weaknesses!" By contrast, we see Mahathir—who does not even smoke and quotes liberally the Qur'an and Hadith—reviled by the Islamists!

They mock him for his illiteracy in Arabic, the language of Islam. To the Islamists, the more he expounds on certain Islamic issues, the more ridiculous he looks. It is a little as if someone illiterate in English tried to expound on the subtleties of Shakespeare's characters.

When Mahathir enticed Anwar Ibrahim, the Muslim Youth Movement leader, into the government, many regarded the stroke as a brilliant coup. Alas, the result was not the union of two complementary movements. The two men were merely irrepressible ideologues bent on political gain. Exploitative relationships, political or personal, rarely endure.

Mahathir's intent was to blunt the growing Islamist movement by co-opting its most charismatic leader. Anwar saw it as his divine mission to rescue UMNO from its infidel ways, and in the process secure for himself a comfortable government job. The surprise is that their relationship lasted so long.

Mahathir's mistake was not in failing to separate religion from politics, as all his wise predecessors did, but in arrogantly believing that he could control and tame the Islamist beast, instead of keeping it at bay. He offered bribes to the Islamists—though not overtly as to offend their religiosity. He gave lush government jobs to those willing to toe the party line. He vastly expanded the religious establishment, which is nothing more than a massive public works project for otherwise unemployable Islamic Studies graduates.

The more Mahathir feeds the Islamist monster, the more demanding it gets. Now it dictates what it wants, and it wants Mahathir. Interestingly, the greater Muslim world holds Mahathir in high esteem.

When Mahathir recently terminated funding for Islamic schools in an attempt to curtail the influence of the Islamists, he played right into their hands. A more enlightened strategy would have been to *increase* the funding, but tie it to modernizing the curriculum. By doing so, he would be not abandoning those precious young minds, but preparing them better for the real world, a strategy that would have endeared him to students, parents and teachers.

Mahathir's expansion of the religious schools and establishment had another unintended and undesirable effect. It diverted scarce Malay talent into the non-productive pursuit of religious studies, leaving even fewer to pursue the sciences.

The tasks facing the government are to shrink the Islamic establishment and to modernize Islamic schools, so that they become less like seminaries and more like U.S. Catholic schools and colleges, producing their share of scientists and professionals. Such schools would increase Malay competitiveness, in turn enhancing race relations.

It might well take someone with the religious pedigree of Abdullah Badawi to accomplish these tasks, just as it took a Nixon to go to China.

A Preview of Pak 'Lah's Rule—Not Reassuring

Abdullah Badawi has boasted that taking over from Mahathir would be "a piece of cake." He is either overestimating his talent or too naive to recognize the challenges. Time will tell, but he has given us ample preview.

He bravely talks of the "New Malay Dilemma"—weaning Malays off special privileges[9]—but seems blissfully unaware of the difficulties that would entail. The hordes of "entrepreneurs" and rent seekers who are accustomed to juicy government favors will not take kindly to any decrease in government munificence. The same goes for the generation hooked on special privileges.

A "preview" of Abdullah Badawi's management ability can be had in the one department under his jurisdiction—the police, which is consistently ranked low in public esteem. For example, the police's muzzling of the media frequently backfires, as when *Malaysiakini* (the Internet publication for which I write) was raided in January.[10] The government's already tenuous credibility that the information technology sector would be spared censorship has been damaged.

If "Pak 'Lah" (Uncle Abdullah) is truly an expression of respect, why does no one call Dr. Mahathir "Pak 'Thir"?

On his appointment as home minister in 1999, Abdullah Badawi was asked about the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA). He raised his right hand and solemnly said, "This hand has never signed an order for the ISA." That reassured many. Well, that was then—today, that hand is soiled.

Recently the *Economist* printed some mildly uncomplimentary comments on Mahathir. Someone must have brought that fact to Abdullah's attention,

for he immediately orchestrated a protest against the publication, no doubt to impress his boss. Abdullah must not have read the original piece. If he had, he would have noticed that the *Economist* made even more disparaging remarks about him![11]

As a former bureaucrat, Abdullah Badawi has an undying faith in the civil service. But today that institution has changed from past years. The decline is clear to anyone reading the daily headlines or, more practically, trying to renew a driver's license. The civil service is insular, promotes strictly from within, and tends to recruit liberal-arts graduates from local universities with limited English fluency and abysmal quantitative skills.

Malaysians endearingly refer to Abdullah Badawi as "Pak 'Lah" (Uncle Abdullah). But in a Malay village, someone is called "Pak" when he is no longer in the loop—when he is included in the conversation merely out of courtesy. If "Pak 'Lah" is truly an expression of respect, why does no one call Dr. Mahathir, "Pak Mahathir" or "Pak 'Thir"? Anyone who dared do so would get a cold searing glare as his reply.

To his credit, Abdullah Badawi has not succumbed to the subtle yet intense pressure from Mahathir to name a deputy. If he can break tradition and bypass the next tier of UMNO leaders weaned on money politics, then he will be doing himself and Malaysia a great service. He would need to cast his net deep and wide. But in truth, I do not see him going against tradition.

Mahathir's departure should, in theory, encourage greater pluralism, but it also risks greater chaos. Malaysians have yet to learn to disagree agreeably, a skill requiring patience and practice that Malaysians never had opportunity to develop under Mahathir. Already the warlords in UMNO are emboldened, anticipating his departure. UMNO risks degenerating into an Afghanistan, with Abdullah Badawi its Hamed Karzai, minus the sartorial elegance.

In 1969, fear of UMNO's losing power triggered the nation's worse race riot. I do not anticipate similar hostilities today because the demographics and race dynamics have changed significantly. However, the Islamic party's winning of more seats nationally than UMNO would certainly fracture the Malays severely and precipitate a calamity of even greater proportions.

Abdullah Badawi's admirable qualities are his honesty and humility—scarce commodities in politicians anywhere. So when he declares that he will maintain Mahathir's policies, I believe him. But I do hope that he is merely saying that now out of deference to "Pak 'Thir," and will see things differently when he is his own man. If he does not, than expect Malaysia to merely coast along.

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